

## Flint and Fire

My husband's cousin had come up from the city, slightly more fagged and sardonic than usual. As he stretched himself out in the big porch-chair he lost no time in taking up his familiar indictment of what he enjoys calling Vermonters' emotional sterility.

"Oh, I admit their honesty. They don't forge checks. And they're steady. Sure. They never burn their neighbors' barns. You can count on them to plug ahead through thrifty, gritty, cautious lives. But no more! No inner heat. Not a spark ever struck out. They're inhibition-bound! Generations of niggling nay-sayers have dried out all feeling from them except . . ."

I pushed the lemonade pitcher nearer him, clinking the ice invitingly. With a wave of my hand I indicated our iris bed, a more cheerful object for contemplation than the flat monotony of rural life. The flowers burned on their stalks like yellow tongues of flame. The strong green leaves, vibrating with vigorous life, thrust themselves up into the spring air.

In the field beyond them, as vigorous as they, strode Adoniram Purdon behind his team, the reins tied together behind his muscular neck, his hands gripping the plow handles. The hot sweet spring sunshine shone down on 'Niram's head with its thick crest of brown hair. The ineffable odor of newly turned earth steamed up around him like incense. The mountain stream at the fence-corner leaped and shouted. His powerful body answered every call made on it with the precision of a splendid machine. But there was no elation in the set face as 'Niram wrenched the plow around a



fixed rock, or as, in a more favorable furrow, the gleaming share sped along before the plowman, turning over a long, unbroken brown ribbon of earth.

My cousin-in-law followed my gesture. His eyes rested on the sturdy, silent figure, as it stepped doggedly behind the straining team, the head bent forward, the eyes fixed on the horses' heels.

"There!" he said. "There is an example of what I mean. Is there another race on earth which could produce a man in such a situation who would not on such a day sing or whistle, or at least hold up his head and look at all the earthly glories about him?"

I made no answer, but not for lack of material for speech. 'Niram's reasons for austere self-control were not such as I cared to discuss with my cousin. As we sat looking at him the noon whistle from the village blew. The wise old horses stopped in the middle of a furrow. 'Niram unharnessed them, led them to the shade of a tree, and put on their nose-bags. Then he turned and came toward the house.

"Don't I seem to remember," murmured my cousin under his breath, "that, even though he is a New Englander, he has been known to make up errands to your kitchen to see your pretty Ev'leen Ann?"

I looked at him hard; but he was only gazing down, rather cross-eyed, on his grizzled mustache. Evidently his had been but a chance shot. 'Niram stepped up on the grass at the edge of the porch. He was so tall that he overtopped the railing easily, and, reaching a long arm over to where I sat, he handed me a small package done up in yellowish tissue-paper. Without a nod or a good morning, or any other of the greetings usual in a more effusive culture, he explained briefly:

"My stepmother wanted I should give you this. She said to thank you for the grape juice." As he spoke he looked at me gravely out of deep-set blue eyes, and when he had delivered his message he held his peace.

I expressed myself with the babbling volubility of another kind of culture. "Oh, 'Niram!" I protested as I opened the package and took out a finely embroidered old-fashioned collar. "Oh, 'Niram! How *could* your stepmother give such a thing away? Why, it must be one of her precious family relics. I don't *want* her to give me something every time I do her just a neighborly favor. Can't a neighbor send her in a few bottles of grape juice without her thinking she must pay it back

somehow? It's not kind of her. She has never yet let me do the least thing for her without repaying me with something that is worth ever so much more than the little I've done."

When I had finished my prattling, 'Niram repeated, with an accent of finality, "She wanted I should give it to you."

The older man stirred in his chair. Without looking at him I knew that his gaze on the young rustic was quizzical and that he was recording on the tablets of his merciless memory the ungraceful abruptness of the other's action and manner.

"How is your stepmother feeling today, 'Niram?" I asked.

"Worse."

'Niram came to a full stop with the word. My cousin covered his satirical mouth with his hand.

"Can't the doctor do anything to relieve her?"

'Niram moved at last from his Indian-like immobility. He looked up under the brim of his felt hat at the skyline of the mountain, shimmering iridescent above us. "He says maybe 'lectricity would help her some. I'm goin' to git her the batteries and things soon's I git the rubber bandages paid for."

There was a long silence. My cousin stood up, yawning, and sauntered away toward the door. "Shall I send Ev'leen Ann out to get the pitcher and glasses?" he asked in an accent which he evidently thought very humorously significant.

The strong face under the felt hat turned white, the jaw muscles set, but for all this show of strength there was an instant when the man's eyes looked out with the sick, helpless revelation of pain they might have had when 'Niram was a little boy of ten, a third of his present age, and less than half his present stature. That chance shot rang the bell.

"No, no! Never mind!" I said hastily. "I'll take the tray in when I go."

Without salutation or farewell 'Niram Purdon turned and went back to his work.

The porch was an enchanted place, walled around with starlit darkness, visited by wisps of breezes shaking down from their wings the breath of lilac and syringa, flowering wild grapes, and plowed fields. Down at the foot of our sloping lawn the little river, still swollen by the

melted snow from the mountains, plunged between its stony banks and shouted to the stars.

We three—Paul, his cousin, and I—had disposed our uncomely, useful, middle-aged bodies in the big wicker chairs and left them there while our young souls wandered abroad in the sweet, dark glory of the night. At least Paul and I were doing this, as we sat, hand in hand, thinking of a May night twenty years before. One never knows what Horace is thinking of, but apparently he was not in his usual captious vein, for after a long pause he remarked, "It is a night almost indecorously inviting to the making of love."

My answer seemed grotesquely out of key with this, but its sequence was clear in my mind. I got up, saying: "Oh, that reminds me—I must go and see Ev'leen Ann. I'd forgotten to plan tomorrow's dinner."

"Oh, everlastingly Ev'leen Ann!" mocked Horace from his corner. "Can't you think of anything but Ev'leen Ann and her affairs?"

I felt my way through the darkness of the house, toward the kitchen, both doors of which were tightly closed. When I stepped into the hot, close room, smelling of food and fire, I saw Ev'leen Ann sitting on the straight kitchen chair, the yellow light of the bracket-lamp beating down on her heavy braids and bringing out the exquisitely subtle modeling of her smooth young face. Her hands were folded in her lap. She was staring at the blank wall, and the expression of her eyes so startled and shocked me that I stopped short and would have retreated if it had not been too late. She had seen me, roused herself, and said quietly, as though continuing a conversation interrupted the moment before:

"I had been thinking that there was enough left of the roast to make hash-balls for dinner"—Ev'leen Ann would never have used a fancy name like croquettes—"and maybe you'd like a rhubarb pie."

I knew well enough she had been thinking of no such thing, but I could as easily have slapped a reigning sovereign on the back as broken in on the regal reserve of Ev'leen Ann in her clean gingham.

"Well, yes, Ev'leen Ann," I answered in her own tone of reasonable consideration of the matter, "that would be nice, and your piecrust is so flaky that even Mr. Horace will have to be pleased."

"Mr. Horace" is our title for the sardonic cousin whose carping ways are half a joke, and half a menace, in our household.

Ev'leen Ann could not manage a smile. She looked down soberly at the white-pine top of the kitchen table and said, "I guess there is enough sparrow-grass up in the garden for a mess, too, if you'd like that."

"That would taste very good," I agreed, my heart aching for her.

"And creamed potatoes," she finished steadily, thrusting my unspoken pity from her.

"You know I like creamed potatoes better than any other kind," I concurred.

There was a silence. It seemed inhuman to go and leave the stricken young thing to fight her trouble alone in the ugly prison, her work-place, though I thought I could guess why Ev'leen Ann had shut the doors so tightly. I hung near her, searching my head for something to say, but she helped me by no casual remark. 'Niram is not the only one of our people who possesses to the full the supreme gift of silence. Finally I mentioned the report of a case of measles in the village, and Ev'leen Ann responded in kind with the news that her Aunt Emma had bought a potato-planter. Ev'leen Ann is an orphan, brought up by a well-to-do spinster aunt, who is strong-minded and runs her own farm. After a time we glided by way of similar transitions to the mention of his name.

"'Niram Purdon tells me his stepmother is no better," I said. "Isn't it too bad?" I thought it well for Ev'leen Ann to be dragged out of her black cave of silence once in a while, even if it could be done only by force. As she made no answer, I went on. "Everybody who knows 'Niram thinks it splendid of him to do so much for his stepmother."

Ev'leen Ann responded with a detached air, as though speaking of a matter in China: "Well, it ain't any more than what he should. She was awful good to him when he was little and his father got so sick. I guess 'Niram wouldn't ha' had much to eat if she hadn't ha' gone out sewing to earn it for him and Mr. Purdon." She added firmly, after a moment's pause, "No, ma'am, I don't guess it's any more than what 'Niram had ought to do."

"But it's very hard on a young man to feel that he's not able to marry," I continued. Once in a great while we came so near the matter as this. Ev'leen Ann made no answer. Her face took on a pinched look of sickness. She set her lips as though she would never speak again. But I knew that a criticism of 'Niram would always rouse her, and said:

"And really, I think 'Niram makes a great mistake to act as he does. A wife would be a help to him. She could take care of Mrs. Purdon and keep the house."

Ev'leen Ann rose to the bait, speaking quickly with some heat: "I guess 'Niram knows what's right for him to do! He can't afford to marry when he can't even keep up with the doctor's bills and all. He keeps the house himself, nights and mornings, and Mrs. Purdon is awful handy about taking care of herself, for all she's bedridden. That's her way, you know. She can't bear to have folks do for her. She'd die before she'd let anybody do anything for her that she could anyways do for herself!"

I sighed acquiescingly. Mrs. Purdon's fierce independence was a rock on which every attempt at sympathy or help shattered itself to atoms. There seemed to be no other emotion left in her poor old work-worn shell of a body. As I looked at Ev'leen Ann it seemed rather a hateful characteristic, and I remarked, "It seems to me it's asking a good deal of 'Niram to spoil his life in order that his stepmother can go on pretending she's independent."

Ev'leen Ann explained hastily: "Oh, 'Niram doesn't tell her anything about—she doesn't know he would like to—he don't want she should be worried—and, anyhow, as 'tis, he can't earn enough to keep ahead of all the doctors cost."

"But the right kind of a wife—a good, competent girl—could help out by earning something, too."

Ev'leen Ann looked at me forlornly, with no surprise. The idea was evidently not new to her. "Yes, ma'am, she could. But 'Niram says he ain't the kind of man to let his wife go out working." Even while she drooped under the killing verdict of his pride she was loyal to his standards and uttered no complaint. She went on, "'Niram wants Aunt Em'line to have things the way she wants 'em, as near as he can give 'em to her—and it's right she should."

"Aunt Emeline?" I repeated, surprised at her absence of mind. "You mean Mrs. Purdon, don't you?"

Ev'leen Ann looked vexed at her slip, but she scorned to attempt any concealment. She explained dryly, with the shy, stiff embarrassment our country people have in speaking of private affairs: "Well, she *is* my Aunt Em'line, Mrs. Purdon is, though I don't hardly ever call her that.

You see, Aunt Emma brought me up, and she and Aunt Em'line don't have anything to do with each other. They were twins, and when they were girls they got edgeways over 'Niram's father, when 'Niram was a baby and his father was a young widower and come courting. Then Aunt Em'line married him, and Aunt Emma never spoke to her afterward."

Occasionally, in walking unsuspectingly along one of our leafy lanes, some such fiery geyser of ancient heat uprears itself in a boiling column. I never get used to it, and started back now.

"Why, I never heard of that before, and I've known your Aunt Emma and Mrs. Purdon for years!"

"Well, they're pretty old now," said Ev'leen Ann listlessly, with the natural indifference of self-centered youth to the bygone tragedies of the preceding generation. "It happened quite some time ago. And both of them were so touchy if anybody seemed to speak about it, that folks got in the way of letting it alone. First Aunt Emma wouldn't speak to her sister because she'd married the man she'd wanted, and then when Aunt Emma made out so well farmin' and got so well off, why, then Mrs. Purdon wouldn't try to make it up because she was so poor. That was after Mr. Purdon had had his stroke of paralysis and they'd lost their farm and she'd taken to goin' out sewin'—not but what she was always perfectly satisfied with her bargain. She always acted as though she'd rather have her husband's old shirt stuffed with straw than any other man's whole body. He was a real nice man, I guess, Mr. Purdon was."

There I had it—the curt, unexpanded chronicle of two passionate lives. And there I had also the key to Mrs. Purdon's fury of independence. It was the only way in which she could defend her husband against the charge, so damning in her world, of not having provided for his wife. It was the only monument she could rear to her husband's memory. And her husband had been all there was in life for her!

I stood looking at her young kinswoman's face, noting the granite under the velvet softness of its youth, and divining the flame under the granite. I longed to break through her wall, to put my arms about her. On the impulse of the moment I cast aside the pretense of casualness.

"Oh, my dear!" I said. "Are you and 'Niram always to go on like this? Can't anybody help you?"

Ev'leen Ann looked at me, her face suddenly old and gray. "No, ma'am; we ain't going to go on this way. We've decided, 'Niram and I have, that it ain't no use. We've decided that we'd better not go places together any more or see each other. It's too—if 'Niram thinks we can't"—she flamed so that I knew she was burning from head to foot—"it's better for us not—" She ended in a muffled voice, hiding her face in the crook of her arm.

Ah, yes; now I knew why Ev'leen Ann had shut out the passionate breath of the spring night!

I stood near her, a lump in my throat, but I divined the anguish of her shame at her involuntary self-revelation, and respected it. I dared do no more than to touch her shoulder gently.

The door behind us rattled. Ev'leen Ann sprang up and turned her face toward the wall. Paul's cousin came in, shuffling a little, blinking his eyes in the light of the unshaded lamp, and looking very old and tired. He glanced at us as he went over to the sink. "Nobody offered me anything good to drink," he complained, "so I came in to get some water from the faucet for my nightcap."

When he had drunk with ostentation from the tin dipper, he went to the outside door and flung it open. "Don't you people know how hot and smelly it is in here?" he said roughly.

The night wind burst in, eddying, and puffed out the lamp. In an instant the room was filled with coolness and perfumes and the rushing sound of the river. Out of the darkness came Ev'leen Ann's young voice. "It seems to me," she said, as though speaking to herself, "that I never heard the Mill Brook sound so loud as it has this spring."

I woke up that night with the start one has at a sudden call. But there had been no call. A profound silence spread itself through the sleeping house. Outdoors the wind had died down. Only the loud brawl of the river broke the stillness under the stars. But all through this silence and this vibrant song there rang a soundless menace which brought me out of bed and to my feet before I was awake. I heard Paul say, "What's the matter?" in a sleepy voice, and "Nothing," I answered, reaching for my dressing-gown and slippers. I listened for a moment, my head ringing with frightening neighborhood tales I had been brought up on—that despairing Hilton boy who, when his sweetheart—the Raven

Rocks loomed up, with their hundred-foot straight drop to death—and the deserted wife—. There was still no sound. I stepped rapidly along the hall and up the stairs to Ev'leen Ann's room, and opened the door. Without knocking. The room was empty.

Then how I ran! Calling loudly for Paul to join me, I ran down the two flights of stairs, out of the open door, and along the hedged path that leads down to the little river. The starlight was clear. I could see everything as plainly as though in early dawn. I saw the river, and I saw—Ev'leen Ann!

There was a dreadful moment of horror, which I shall never remember very clearly, and then Ev'leen Ann and I—both very wet—stood on the bank, shuddering in each other's arms.

Into our hysteria there dropped, like a pungent caustic, the arid voice of Horace, remarking, "Well, are you two people crazy, or are you walking in your sleep?"

I could feel Ev'leen Ann stiffen in my arms, and I fairly stepped back from her in astonished admiration as I heard her snatch at the straw thus offered, and still shuddering horribly from head to foot, force herself to say quite connectedly: "Why—yes—of course—I've always heard about my grandfather Parkman's walking in his sleep. Folks *said* 'twould come out in the family some time."

Paul was close behind Horace—I wondered a little at his not being first—and with many astonished and inane ejaculations, such as people always make on startling occasions, we took our way back into the house to hot blankets and toddies. But I slept no more that night.

Some time after dawn, however, I did fall into a troubled unconsciousness full of bad dreams, and only woke when the sun was quite high. I opened my eyes to see Ev'leen Ann about to close the door.

"Oh, did I wake you up?" she said. "I didn't mean to. That little Harris boy is here with a letter for you."

She spoke with a slightly defiant tone of self-possession. I tried to play up to her interpretation of her role.

"The little Harris boy?" I said, sitting up in bed. "What in the world is he bringing me a letter for?"

Ev'leen Ann, with her usual clear perception of the superfluous in conversation, turned away silently, went downstairs and brought back the note. It was of four lines, and—surprisingly enough—from old

Mrs. Purdon, who asked me abruptly if I would have my husband take me to see her. She specified, and underlined the specification, that I was to come "right off, and in the automobile." Wondering extremely at this mysterious bidding, I sought out Paul, who obediently cranked up our small car and carried me off. There was no sign of Horace about the house, but some distance on the other side of the village we saw his tall, stooping figure swinging along the road. He carried a cane and was characteristically occupied in violently switching off the heads from the wayside weeds as he walked. He refused our offer to take him in, alleging that he was out for exercise and to reduce his flesh—an ancient jibe at his bony frame which made him for an instant show a leathery smile.

There was, of course, no one at Mrs. Purdon's to let us into the tiny, three-roomed house, since the bedridden invalid spent her days there alone while 'Niram worked his team on other people's fields. Not knowing what we might find, Paul stayed outside in the car, while I stepped inside in answer to Mrs. Purdon's "Come *in*, why don't you!" which sounded quite as dry as usual. But when I saw her I knew that things were not as usual.

She lay flat on her back, the little emaciated wisp of humanity, hardly raising the piecework quilt enough to make the bed seem occupied, and to account for the thin, worn old face on the pillow. But as I entered the room her eyes seized on mine, and I was aware of nothing but them and some fury of determination behind them. With a fierce heat of impatience at my first natural but quickly repressed exclamation of surprise she explained briefly that she wanted Paul to lift her into the automobile and take her into the next township to the Andrews farm. "I'm so shrunk away to nothin', I know I can lay on the back seat if I crook myself up," she said, with a cool accent but a rather shaky voice.

I suppose that my face showed the wildness of my astonishment for she added, as if in explanation, but still with a ferocious determination to keep up the matter-of-fact tone: "Emma Andrews is my twin sister. I guess it ain't so queer, my wanting to see her."

I thought, of course, we were to be used as the medium for some strange, sudden family reconciliation, and went out to ask Paul if he thought he could carry the old invalid to the car. He replied that, so far as that went, he could carry so thin an old body ten times around the town,

but that he refused absolutely to take such a risk without authorization from her doctor. I remembered the burning eyes of resolution I had left inside, and sent him to present his objections to Mrs. Purdon herself.

In a few moments I saw him emerge from the house with the old woman in his arms. He had evidently taken her up just as she lay. The piecework quilt hung down in long folds, flashing its brilliant reds and greens in the sunshine, which shone so strangely upon the pallid old countenance, facing the open sky for the first time in years.

We drove in silence through the green and gold lyric of the spring day, an elderly company sadly out of key with the triumphant note of eternal youth which rang through all the visible world. Mrs. Purdon looked at nothing, said nothing, seemed to be aware of nothing but the purpose in her heart, whatever that might be. Paul and I, taking a leaf from our neighbors' book, held, with a courage like theirs, to their excellent habit of saying nothing when there is nothing to say. We arrived at the fine old Andrews place without the exchange of a single word.

"Now carry me in," said Mrs. Purdon briefly, evidently hoarding her strength.

"Wouldn't I better go and see if Miss Andrews is at home?" I asked.

Mrs. Purdon shook her head impatiently and turned her compelling eyes on my husband. I went up the path before them to knock at the door, wondering what the people in the house *could* possibly be thinking of us. There was no answer to my knock. "Open the door and go in," commanded Mrs. Purdon from out her quilt.

There was no one in the spacious, white-paneled hall, and no sound in all the big, many-roomed house.

"Emma's out feeding the hens," conjectured Mrs. Purdon, not, I fancied, without a faint hint of relief in her voice, "Now carry me upstairs to the first room on the right."

Half hidden by his burden, Paul rolled wildly inquiring eyes at me; but he obediently staggered up the broad old staircase, and, waiting till I had opened the first door to the right, stepped into the big bedroom.

"Put me down on the bed, and open them shutters," Mrs. Purdon commanded.

She still marshaled her forces with no lack of decision, but with a fainting voice which made me run over to her quickly as Paul laid her

down on the four-poster. Her eyes were still indomitable, but her mouth hung open slackly and her color was startling. "Oh, Paul, quick! quick! Haven't you your flask with you?"

Mrs. Purdon informed me in a barely audible whisper, "In the corner cupboard at the head of the stairs," and I flew down the hallway. I returned with a bottle, evidently of great age. There was only a little brandy in the bottom, but it whipped up a faint color into the sick woman's lips.

As I was bending over her and Paul was thrusting open the shutters, letting in a flood of sunshine and flecky leaf-shadows, a firm, rapid step came down the hall, and a vigorous woman, with a tanned face and a clean, faded gingham dress, stopped short in the doorway with an expression of stupefaction.

Mrs. Purdon put me on one side, and although she was physically incapable of moving her body by a hair's breadth, she gave the effect of having risen to meet the newcomer. "Well, Emma, here I am," she said in a queer voice, with involuntary quavers in it. As she went on she had it more under control, although in the course of her extraordinarily succinct speech it broke and failed her occasionally. When it did, she drew in her breath with an audible, painful effort, struggling forward steadily in what she had to say. "You see, Emma, it's this way: My 'Niram and your Ev'leen Ann have been keeping company—ever since they went to school together—you know that's well as I do, for all we let on we didn't, only I didn't know till just now how hard they took it. They can't get married because 'Niram can't keep even, let alone get ahead any, because I cost so much bein' sick, and the doctor says I may live for years this way, same's Aunt Hettie did. An' 'Niram is thirty-one, an' Ev'leen Ann is twenty-eight, an' they've had 'bout's much waitin' as is good for folks that set such store by each other. I've thought of every way out of it—and there ain't any. The Lord knows I don't enjoy livin' any. I'd thought of cutting my throat like Uncle Lish, but that'd make 'Niram and Ev'leen Ann feel so—to think why I'd done it; they'd never take the comfort they'd ought in bein' married. So that won't do. There's only one thing to do. I guess you'll have to take care of me till the Lord calls me. Maybe I won't last so long as the doctor thinks."

When she finished, I felt my ears ringing in the silence. She had walked to the sacrificial altar with so steady a step, and laid upon it her precious all with so gallant a front of quiet resolution, that for an instant I failed to take in the sublimity of her self-immolation. Mrs. Purdon asking for charity! And asking the one woman who had most reason to refuse it to her.

Paul looked at me miserably, the craven desire to escape a scene written all over him. "Wouldn't we better be going, Mrs. Purdon?" I said uneasily. I had not ventured to look at the woman in the doorway.

Mrs. Purdon motioned me to remain, with an imperious gesture whose fierceness showed the tumult underlying her brave front. "No; I want you should stay. I want you should hear what I say, so's you can tell folks, if you have to. Now, look here, Emma," she went on to the other, still obstinately silent, "you must look at it the way 'tis. We're neither of us any good to anybody, the way we are—and I'm dreadfully in the way of the only two folks we care a pin about—either of us. You've got plenty to do with, and nothing to spend it on. I can't get myself out of their way by dying without going against what's Scripture and proper, but—" Her steely calm broke. She burst out in a scream. "You've just got to, Emma Andrews! You've just got to! If you don't, I won't never go back to 'Niram's house! I'll lie in the ditch by the roadside till the poor-master comes to git me—and I'll tell everybody that it's because my twin sister, with a house and a farm and money in the bank, turned me out to starve—" A spasm cut her short. She lay twisted, the whites of her eyes showing between the lids.

"Good God, she's gone!" cried Paul, running to the bed.

Instantly the woman in the doorway was between Paul and me as we rubbed the thin, icy hands and forced brandy between the flaccid lips. We all three thought her dead or dying, and labored over her with the frightened thankfulness for one another's living presence which always marks that dreadful moment. But even as we fanned and rubbed, and cried out to one another to open the windows and to bring water, the blue lips moved to a ghostly whisper: "Em, listen—" The old woman went back to the nickname of their common youth. "Em—your Ev'leen Ann—tried to drown herself—in the Mill Brook last night . . . That's what decided me—to—" And then we were plunged into another

desperate struggle with Death for the possession of the battered old habitation of the dauntless soul.

"Isn't there any hot water in the house?" cried Paul, and "Yes, yes; teakettle on the stove!" answered the woman who labored with us. Paul, divining that she meant the kitchen, fled downstairs. I stole a look at Emma Andrews' face as she bent over the sister she had not seen in thirty years, and I knew that Mrs. Purdon's battle was won. It even seemed that she had won another skirmish in her never-ending war with death, for a little warmth began to come back into her hands.

When Paul returned with the teakettle, and a hot-water bottle had been filled, the owner of the house straightened herself, assumed her rightful position as mistress of the situation, and began to issue commands. "You git right in the automobile, and go git the doctor," she told Paul. "That'll be the quickest. She's better now, and your wife and I can keep her goin' till the doctor gits here."

As Paul left the room she snatched something white from a bureau drawer, stripped the worn, patched old cotton nightgown from the skeleton-like body, and, handling the invalid with a strong, sure touch, slipped on a soft, woolly outing-flannel wrapper with a curious trimming of zigzag braid down the front. Mrs. Purdon opened her eyes very slightly, but shut them again at her sister's quick command, "You lay still, Em'line, and drink some of this brandy." She obeyed without comment, but after a pause she opened her eyes again and looked down at the new garment which clad her. She had that moment turned back from the door of death, but her first breath was used to set the scene for a return to a decorum.

"You're still a great hand for rickrack work, Em, I see," she murmured in a faint whisper. "Do you remember how surprised Aunt Su was when you made up a pattern?"

"Well, I hadn't thought of it for quite some time," returned Miss Andrews, in exactly the same tone of everyday remark. As she spoke she slipped her arm under the other's head and poked the pillow up to a more comfortable shape. "Now you lay perfectly still," she commanded in the hectoring tone of the born nurse; "I'm goin' to run down and make you a good hot cup of sassafras tea."

I followed her down into the kitchen and was met by the same refusal to be melodramatic which I had encountered in Ev'leen Ann. I was most anxious to know what version of my extraordinary morning I was to give out to the world, but hung silent, abashed by the cool casualness of the other woman as she mixed her brew. Finally, "Shall I tell 'Niram— What shall I say to Ev'leen Ann? If anybody asks me—" I brought out with clumsy hesitation.

At the realization that her reserve and family pride were wholly at the mercy of any report I might choose to give, even my iron hostess faltered. She stopped short in the middle of the floor, looked at me silently, piteously.

I hastened to assure her that I would attempt no hateful picturesqueness. "Suppose I just say that you were rather lonely here, now that Ev'leen Ann has left you, and that you thought it would be nice to have your sister come to stay with you, so that 'Niram and Ev'leen Ann can be married?"

Emma Andrews breathed again. She walked toward the stairs with the steaming cup in her hand. Over her shoulder she remarked, "Well, yes; that could be as good a way to put it as any, I guess."

'Niram and Ev'leen Ann were standing up to be married. They looked very stiff and self-conscious, and Ev'leen Ann was very pale. 'Niram's big hands, crooked as though they still held an axhelve or steered a plow, hung down by his new black trousers. Ev'leen Ann's strong fingers stood out stiffly from one another. They looked hard at the minister and repeated after him in low and meaningless tones the solemn and touching words of the marriage service. Back of them stood the wedding company, in freshly washed and ironed white dresses, new straw hats, and black suits smelling of camphor. In the background, among the other elders, stood Paul and Horace and I—my husband and I hand in hand, Horace twiddling the black ribbon which holds his watch and looking bored. Through the open windows into the stuffiness of the best room came an echo of the deep organ note of midsummer.

"Whom God hath joined together—" said the minister, and the epitome of humanity which filled the room held its breath—the old

with a wonder upon their life-scarred faces, the young half frightened to feel the stir of the great wings soaring so near them.

Then it was all over. 'Niram and Ev'leen Ann were married, and the rest of us were bustling about to serve the hot biscuit and coffee and chicken salad, and to dish up the ice cream. Afterward there were no citified refinements of cramming rice down the necks of the departing pair or tying placards to the carriage in which they went away. Some of the men went out to the barn and hitched up for 'Niram, and we all gathered at the gate to see them drive off. They might have been going for one of their Sunday afternoon "buggy-rides" except for the wet eyes of the foolish women and girls who stood waving their hands in answer to the flutter of Ev'leen Ann's handkerchief as the carriage went down the hill.

We had nothing to say to one another after they left, and began soberly to disperse to our respective vehicles. But as I was getting into our car a new thought suddenly struck me.

"Why," I cried, "I never thought of it before! However in the world did old Mrs. Purdon know about Ev'leen Ann—that night?"

Horace was pulling at the door. Its hinges were sprung and it shut hard. He closed it with a vicious slam. "I told her," he said crossly.